

What Women Need to Know About Cancer of the Cervix

What is the cervix?

The cervix is the opening to the uterus. The cervix connects the uterus to the vagina.

What is cancer of the cervix?

Cancer of the cervix happens when cells in the cervix change and grow out of control. These cells can change from normal to pre-cancer and then to cancer.

If these changes in the cells are found and treated early, we can keep them from becoming cancer.

Why do women get cancer of the cervix?

The main cause of cancer of the cervix is HPV, a very common virus. It is passed by skin-to-skin contact during sex.

There are many types of HPV. Some cause genital warts and others cause cancer of the cervix.

Some types of HPV go away without treatment. Other types of HPV can change the cells in the cervix. These changes could lead to cancer.

Are there other risks?

A woman has a higher chance of getting cancer of the cervix if:

- She has had sex with more than one partner.
- She has sex with someone who has other sex partners.
- She smokes cigarettes.
- She has HIV or a weak immune system.

Talk with your doctor about other things that might give you a higher chance of getting this cancer.

What can lower the chances of getting it?

You can lower your chances of getting HPV.

- Ask about the HPV vaccine. Girls and young women between the ages of 9 and 26 can get this vaccine.
- Have sex with only one person who only has sex with you.
- Limit the number of sex partners you have.
- Use condoms the right way every time you have sex.

There are other things you can do to help.

- Get a Pap test as often as your doctor suggests. This test checks for cancer of the cervix.
- Stop smoking or never start.

What should you watch out for?

Cancer of the cervix often has no early signs or symptoms. See your doctor right away if you:

- Bleed during or after sex.
- Bleed after a pelvic exam.
- Bleed or have a discharge after you've gone through menopause.
- Have pelvic pain.
- Have pain during sex.

These signs can also be caused by something else. Check with your doctor to be sure. Don't wait. Your health is important.

You can make a difference!

The changes that lead to cancer of the cervix can be found and treated.

All women from the ages of 21 to 65 should get regular Pap tests. If you are over 65, ask your doctor if you should be screened.

- Ask your doctor how often you should have a check-up.
- Get your first Pap test at age 21.
- Get a Pap test every 3 years if you are 21 to 65 years old.
- Or, starting at age 30, you can get a Pap test along with an HPV test every 5 years.
- Talk to your doctor about what your tests show. Make sure to get follow-up care or testing if you need it.

What tests or exams can help?

For the Pap test, the doctor lightly touches the cervix to remove some cells. This sample is then sent to a lab.

If the Pap test is not normal, the doctor may send you for a colposcopy exam. This is a careful look of the cervix using a special lens.

Sometimes a biopsy may also need to be done. The doctor will cut a tiny bit of the cervix and test it for changes that could lead to cancer.

What if cancer is found?

There are many ways to treat this cancer. Treatment may include surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy. The earlier it is treated, the better.

- To find out more, ask your doctor.
- See your doctor if you have any signs or symptoms.
- Ask your doctor any questions you may have about your health.

Take good care of yourself for you and for your loved ones!

To learn more, visit:

- U.S. Preventive Services Task Force
www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org
- CDC Inside Knowledge Campaign
www.cdc.gov
- National Cancer Institute
www.cancer.gov/cancer
- National Library of Medicine
www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov

